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ARTICLE

To Maxine Greene on Her 90th Birthday

James M. Giarelli

I couldn't help beginning this paean to Maxine Greene on her 90th birthday without thinking of John Dewey's 90th birthday on October 20, 1949. There were a couple of *festschrift* volumes growing out of conferences at the Universities of Illinois and Wisconsin, letters from scholars, artists, activists, and public figures, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and much public notice and tribute. A lot of nice things were said about Dewey and science, reflective thinking, social planning, the great community, and other ideas central to his storied career. In 1949, it seemed the Anglo-American imperium was in triumph, the world had been made safe for capitalism, and the stage was set for analytic philosophy to exert its hegemony. But at the very same time, a different swell was moving through the world, stained by Hiroshima, the Holocausts, and the banality of evil, cultural malaise, political repression, and social hucksterism; represented dangerously in a deeper undercurrent of literary and aesthetic misgiving and uncertainty. This undercurrent was present at Dewey's 90th as well, as Kenneth Benne (1951), one of the organizers of the Illinois conference, was about to counter the rhetoric of the "American Century" by writing about education and tragedy. Many of you will recognize this as the same starting place of Maxine's book, *The Public School and the Private Vision* (1965/2007), in which she juxtaposes the optimistic literature of the common school movement with the more worried interpretations represented in the literature of the 19th century American novel. In this book, and for another 50 years, Maxine Greene--an outsider, a woman, a Jew, a mother--has urged us to resist the lulling solace of progress and stay awake to the dialectic of freedom.

In some ways, the connection to Dewey is direct. In his only autobiographical statement, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," Dewey (1930), always portrayed, and sometimes mocked, even by himself, as the solid middle-class Vermont burgher, instead describes himself as unstable, chameleon-like, torn asunder, incapable of self-definition, marked by stigmata borne since childhood from unresolved issues of choosing between the god-fearing heart of the family and the worldly mind of the manly professions emerging in the society around him. But while there is no peace for a wanderer, Dewey tells us that he *chooses* to wander as a condition of a living freedom. Dewey insists, like our teacher Maxine Greene, that he is . . . not yet.

And in the same essay he predicts that the next great phase in philosophy will be the aesthetic. Much has been made of this line over the years; always to the effect that Dewey was wrong. And it certainly seemed that way to those of us studying philosophy and philosophy of education in the 1950s, '60s, '70s and beyond. We fought our battles as pragmatists, essentialist, realists, idealists, ordinary language philosophers, sometimes Marxists, later feminists, but we were all certain that what we were doing was philosophy, not art. We learned how to read as some variant of reflection--where the *lec* stood for *lux*, which stood for *light*, and thus where correspondence or at least coherence between our symbols and the world was assumed.

Maxine taught us how to read in a different way. She taught us that the *lec* in reflection stood for *lect*, which came from *legein*--to read-- and thus opened up another meaning of literacy. Maxine taught us that reflection was not about correspondence or even coherence, but rather was about the re-reading of texts from our own perspectival vantage points and that the world was a contested, delirious text that was always being re-written and newly read. One of my philosophy professors used to say that philosophy was "slow reading." He meant that to do philosophy, you had to read philosophy texts slowly. Maxine taught us that philosophy is slow reading, but that the activity, not the object, defined the field. A novel read slowly is philosophy--Kant read in three weeks is schoolwork.

I learned this painstakingly through teaching. When I began teaching philosophy of education in 1973, I used one of Maxine's books in every class in an attempt to discharge my professional obligation to "cover the field." My students and I enjoyed the books--"She's so smart!" "She writes so well!" "Did she really read all those books?"--but there was nowhere to put her in the syllabus except into some "brilliant, but idiosyncratic" category. But that's not teaching and so I read more slowly. I soon realized (well, in about five years), that it was not that she was using examples from the arts and literature to make philosophical points, but that the aesthetic WAS her philosophy. Years later, I put it this way when I was asked to write about Maxine's social philosophy for a book edited by Bill Pinar (1998):

For Greene, the arts, specifically imaginative literature, rather than systematic philosophy and theory, are the sources of social and educational thought. This might be understood as the tension between the treatise and the novel . . . Treatises attempt to teach by working inexorably toward the view that they can distinguish between

reality and “mere appearances.” The treatise is the text of the school. Greene offers an alternative source of thought in the novel, both in its meaning as a literary genre, but more fundamentally in its core meaning as the new, different, original, and unordinary. The novel resists the didacticism of the treatise and teaches by substituting adventure, narrative, and choice into the order of events. The novel has no interest in reducing option to truth: instead it relies on the diversity of viewpoints, plurality of descriptions of events, and the dialectic of naming. The novel is the text of a public education. (p. 176)

And in this way, Maxine Greene is the most important philosopher of education, or more accurately, educational theorist, since John Dewey. And just as it was important to note the shift going on at Dewey’s 90th birthday, we know the same is true at Maxine’s. Maxine’s work is quintessentially modernist. I don’t mean the modernism of the Enlightenment ideals of unstoppable progress, reason, and justice, working themselves out in a great chain of being, now stretching around the globe linking humans in compassion and commerce. I mean the modernism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, Maya Angelou, Federico Fellini, Jack Kerouac, and so on. I was thinking about this essay on Maxine this past summer when the great film makers Ingmar Bergmann and then Michelangelo Antonioni died. Along with Jean-Luc Godard, they defined the high modernist era of filmmaking, when a handful of directors were treated as artistic gods and accorded the respect and latitude of great painters or authors. They put the post-war *anomie*, alienation, and *angst* on screen and turned suburban self-pity into something close to tragedy. For those of us raised on film as much as books, their deaths bring down the final curtain on this era. And I couldn’t help but think that they shared this aesthetic, this way of making and expressing meaning, with Maxine.

This aesthetic is gone. Or at least going and going quickly. And it is not being replaced by some revolutionary new image of reflecting, reading, and being literate, but by a commodification of codes so pervasive and pernicious that it is hard to find hope and even harder to write about it.

On Dewey’s 90th birthday, he said he was interested not so much in the Great Community as in the Continuing Community. And he thought that a new aesthetic would be necessary for this. At the end of modernism, Maxine Greene continues to give us re-readings of identities and public spaces in all their multiplicities--and to embody the idea of education and social imagining. This has always been her gift to us.

What can I give to her? Last week in class I showed the wonderful film by Markie Hancock (2001), “*The Life of Maxine Greene: Exclusions and Awakenings*.” In the film, Maxine talks of escaping from her bourgeois Brooklyn family and choosing a modernist community by spending her Sundays at Brooklyn Museum of Art concerts. She tells us of her ambition as a young woman to publish a novel by the age of 20, an ambition she calls unrealized. Here’s my present: The literacy critic Leo Lerman, who shared Maxine’s ambition to write a novel, once said: “I realize that the novel I have wished to write, I have written. My life is that novel. I have been writing it all my life” (2007, p.579). There is no one for which this is truer and more deserved than Maxine Greene. Happy birthday to my friend and teacher.

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